

2 COR. 2:14 – 5:5

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III. Paul's Apostolic Ministry - 2:14 - 7:4

A. Triumphant Progress of the Gospel (2:14-17)

1. Despite the difficulties and suffering involved in apostolic ministry (e.g., affliction in Asia, criticism of his integrity, pain of insult by the Corinthian offender, and inability to settle into mission work in Troas), God is continuously leading Paul and coworkers in a victory parade. There are bumps in the road, temporary frustrations, but the gospel is irresistibly advancing because God ensures the effectiveness of their ministry.

2. Paul continues with the imagery of the triumphal procession when he says that through them God was spreading far and wide the fragrant knowledge of himself to be gained through knowing Christ. During the victory parade incense was burned to the gods and perfume was sprinkled along the parade route.

3. As faithful preachers and followers of Christ, they were a pleasing offering to God (the aroma of Christ to God), again paralleling the offering of incense to gods in the victory parade. As they went among the people, they spread that aroma of Christ. Irrespective of the human response to the gospel, its proclamation delights God's heart because it centers on the Son he loves.

4. The aroma of Christ which they spread had different connotations to different people, just like the incense burned during the parade. To those on the side of the victorious general (those who are being saved), the aroma was associated with the joy of victory. To those opposed to the victorious general (those who are perishing), the aroma was associated with the fate of death which awaited them.

5. The heavy responsibilities of such a ministry cause Paul to ask, "And who is sufficient (or adequate) for such a thing?" In so doing he is implicitly confessing personal inadequacy for the job; his adequacy is from God (3:5).

6. His sense of inadequacy was due to his appreciation of the significance and sacredness of the task. For unlike many others, such as the frauds whose influence was evident in Corinth, he was too awed by the responsibility of his calling to be a "gospel huckster," to treat the gospel as something that could be adulterated for personal gain.

B. Letters of Recommendation (3:1-3)

1. Paul had apparently been criticized by some for "commending himself" instead of having letters of recommendation from others, so he is sensitive to the issue. Those stirring up trouble for Paul in Corinth had come with letters and tried to use that fact

to portray themselves as more credible than Paul. They perhaps brought letters from the Pharisaic wing of the Jerusalem church (see, Acts 15:24) or perhaps from other Hellenistic congregations. It seems that they also received or intended to receive letters of recommendation from the Corinthians when they left. Letters were their credentials for operating.

2. Unlike these recently arrived intruders, Paul had founded the church in Corinth, so its very existence served to accredit his apostleship. This is the same point he made in 1 Cor. 9:1-2 - "Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord."

3. In other words, their existence as a group of Christians *is* Paul's letter of recommendation, a letter authored by Christ himself but brought into being through the agency of the apostle (just like one who writes what is dictated). Christ used Paul to write Paul's own letter of recommendation through the transforming work of the Spirit in their hearts that accompanied the presentation of the gospel in Corinth.

4. Note in 3:2 many commentators read "written on *your* hearts" (e.g., Barrett, Bruce, Martin, Kruse). If "our" is the correct reading, Paul simply is saying that they are dear to his heart despite being physically separated from them. He then immediately turns the metaphor for his present purposes, declaring that they are a publicly visible letter. Verse 3 then refers to the work of God in *their* hearts.

C. Apostolic Confidence (3:4-6)

1. Paul's confidence in his apostolic ministry comes through Christ, who commissioned him to preach, and is held in the presence of God who knows all things. It is not a false confidence based on human recommendation (see, Gal. 1:11-12).

2. Paul hastens to stress that this confidence in his ministry is not self-confidence but a confidence based on the fact that the God who called him to be an apostle made him adequate for the task (see, 1 Cor. 15:9-10). His adequacy might not measure up to the world's standards, but his adequacy is the one that counts, an adequacy determined and apportioned by God.

3. Paul mentions that he and his companions are ministers of a new covenant, in contrast to the old covenant (which apparently the intruders were emphasizing). The new covenant is superior to the old in that the old covenant is one of letter which kills, whereas the new covenant is one of Spirit which gives life.

a. Paul is suggesting that Jews who seek to bind the law of the old covenant, the law of Moses, in the age of Christ are misusing it by making it an end in itself, the basis of one's righteousness before God.

b. Christ is the fulfillment of the old covenant. God has "moved on" in his program, so to speak. Those who refuse to move on with him into the new era, who

continue to require compliance with terms of an obsolete covenant, are pursuing their own agenda of righteousness, not God's.

c. When the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant (the law) are applied outside their context of salvation history, they no longer function as part of a larger covenant but as bare commands. The only way bare commands can offer life is if they are completely obeyed. Since they are not, bare commands bring only death. In other words, when the Mosaic covenant became "old," all that was left of it was the "letter" (law was divorced from covenant), which because of our sinfulness, can only condemn.

d. Of course, some Jews used the law improperly even during the era of the old covenant by making it a set of rules to be observed in order to establish one's own righteousness (rather than as the revealed manner in which the righteous by faith express their trust in God). This legalism no doubt played a role in the attempt to bring the Mosaic law into the new age.

e. The new covenant, on the other hand, is the covenant under which the Spirit is given to all the covenant members, and this Spirit is the source of spiritual life, both now and in the resurrection.

D. Glorious Character of the Apostolic Ministry (3:7-18)

1. Surpassing Glory of the New Covenant (3:7-11)

a. Referring to Ex. 34:29-32, Paul makes the point that Moses' ministry of the old covenant was accompanied by such glory that the Israelites could not even look at his face when he descended from the mountain with the tablets of the law.

b. He then argues that if this ministry -- which was designed to be temporary, which essentially lacked the transforming power of the Spirit, and which is a ministry of death (see C. 3. a-e above) -- came with such glory, then the apostolic ministry of the new covenant, the permanent ministry of the Spirit that brings righteousness, must be even more glorious.

c. In fact, the contrast between the two covenants is so great that what once was rightly considered glorious now fades in comparison. As M. Zerwick said, "If the sun is up, the brightness of the moon is no longer bright."

2. Veiling and Unveiling (3:12-18)

a. Since Paul and his companions are ministers of a permanent covenant (the emphasis of v. 11) that will never be surpassed in splendor, they are very bold or frank in conducting their ministry, as those who have nothing to conceal but every reason for fearless candor.

b. Referring to Ex. 34:33-35, Paul contrasts this boldness to the timidity of Moses in veiling his face to prevent the Israelites from continuing to gaze at his face until it totally lost its reflected glory. It seems Moses was not bold enough to allow the lesson of the old covenant's temporary nature to be taught through such stark means as the Israelites watching his face's reflected glory be extinguished. Rather, he resorted to the indirect route of veiling his face's fading glory. In doing so, he attempted to make the same point, i.e., that the old covenant was not the appropriate object of extreme fixation (intense gazing) because it was not the final stage of salvation history.

c. Note that this is Paul's inspired interpretation of the O.T. text. He deduces that the glory of Moses' face faded, probably from the fact it is not mentioned again after Ex. 34 and the fact that in Ex. 40:35 Moses is hindered from entering the tent of meeting because of "the glory of the Lord that filled it." He then concludes that this was at least partly the reason for the veiling.

d. Unfortunately, the minds of the Israelites were too hardened to receive Moses' indirect teaching. Instead, the veil became an obstacle to their seeing the truth of the temporality of the old covenant. Metaphorically speaking, the same veil was present in Paul's day when the Scriptures were read in Jewish synagogues. The Jews continued to be blind to the true meaning of the old covenant, failing to see it as a preparatory agency making them ready to receive Christ (see, Gal. 3:24).

e. But whenever anyone (with Jews especially in mind) turns to the Lord, meaning is converted to Christ, then the veil is removed, just as it was when Moses would go in before the Lord (Ex. 34:34).

f. "The Lord" in Ex. 34:34 is in the role of (represents) the Spirit in the new covenant in that we experience the divine presence in the person of the Spirit and the veil of obscurity regarding the old covenant is removed when we commune with him, i.e., when we become Christians.

g. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom -- to speak and act openly and without fear. This is the source of apostolic confidence and boldness. Those in communion with God are as bold as lions.

h. In the new covenant, all members (like Moses in the old covenant) behold with an unveiled face the glory of God as it is perfectly reflected in his Son Jesus Christ.

(1) Note: "reflect the Lord's glory" in NIV is better translated "beholding as in a mirror the Lord's glory." Unlike 1 Cor. 13:12, nothing is said about the imperfect quality of the mirrored image.

(2) As the following paragraph indicates, Christ is the image of God (4:4) and in his face is the glory of God (4:6). As we through faith behold God's glory in Christ, we are transformed by being conformed to the likeness of Christ. This

transformation progresses from glory to glory, culminating in the eternal glory of the consummated kingdom in which even our bodies will be transformed into the likeness of Christ's glorious body (Phil. 3:21).

(3) This progressive glorification is from God who, in the new covenant of which Paul is a minister, is present and experienced in the person of the Spirit. The Spirit's role is a distinguishing characteristic of the new covenant, and the transformation of believers is part of his work.

E. Conduct of Paul's Ministry (4:1-6)

1. Because God in his mercy had given Paul such a glorious ministry, had entrusted him with the gospel of Christ, he does not lose heart in the face of his hardships and disappointments. The glory of the mission or cause makes all suffering fade in comparison.

2. Paul again declares (see, 2:17) that, in light of the greatness of the gospel, he and his companions have renounced all unworthy (shameful) ways of presenting it, such as deception or adulterating the word of God. It may be that his Jewish adversaries in Corinth had accused him of concealing the real gospel by watering it down to make it more palatable to Gentiles.

3. Far from obscuring the real gospel, they openly proclaimed the truth and thus did the right thing in the eyes of both men (if they would be honest) and God.

4. And even if their gospel is veiled (obscured), as some apparently claimed, it is veiled to those who are perishing, meaning those who refuse to believe it because their minds have been blinded by Satan. In other words, any veiling that exists is due not to Paul's presentation of the gospel but to the close-mindedness of those who reject that presentation (the use of "veil" suggests that the primary reference here is to his Jewish antagonists - see, 3:14-15).

a. In addition to responding to criticism that he veiled the real gospel in his preaching to the Gentiles, Paul may also have been responding to criticism that his gospel was rejected by a majority of the Jews.

b. Note that Satan can obscure one's appreciation of the gospel. In this case (accepting that the primary reference is to his Jewish antagonists), he does so by playing on Jewish pride to exalt the Mosaic covenant beyond its intended role.

c. Those who reject Paul's gospel are perishing, i.e., on their way to condemnation.

5. The essence of Paul's gospel is not himself but Christ, whom he proclaims as Lord. In 1 Cor. 1:23 Paul says "we preach Christ crucified." These two elements need to be held together. As Colin Kruse says, "In the gospel, the lordship of Christ is proclaimed

and people are called to give their allegiance to him, but the one to whom they are thus called to submit is also the crucified one, the one who died for them."

6. Far from promoting themselves, Paul and his companions had become the Corinthians' servants for Jesus' sake. In other words, they serve humanity in obedience to Christ. 1 Tim. 2:4 says God wants all men to be saved, and Lk. 19:10 says that Jesus came to seek and save what was lost. Paul and his co-workers labor to that end. They do so because God had given them the knowledge of the truth in Christ, who is the glory of God.

F. Treasure in Earthen Vessels (4:7-15)

1. The treasure of the gospel has been entrusted to such ordinary and feeble human servants as Paul and his companions so that there be no confusion as to the source of its surpassing power. (Earthenware vessels were commonplace, weak, and had little intrinsic value.)

a. In being kicked all over the Mediterranean (see, 11:23-28) but still surviving to preach, they were a living lesson that God was the power behind the gospel (see, 1:8-9). Who else could it be?

b. Had they, on the other hand, been people in whom the world gloried, people of power and influence who knew only praise and success (the triumphalists), some might think that the gospel's effect was due, at least in part, to their own abilities.

2. Rather than discrediting them as apostles, Paul says that their daily exposure to danger and death for Christ's sake is a sharing in his fate, in his dying, and that this suffering provides the context for the resurrection life of Jesus to be manifested in their bodies.

a. Thus, their lives reflect the very gospel they preach, a message of life in the midst of death. Because they are subject to deadly forces, they are able to be agents for the disclosure of God's power to save, not only in their deliverance from those afflictions (see, 1:8-9) but also in their living through them as those no longer subject to death (as those who have already shared in the resurrection life - see, Phil. 1:20-21).

b. Here Paul is referring specifically to apostles, but in the first lesson I made the point that there is a solidarity between Christ and his people such that his sufferings overflow into our lives. In other words, all Christians share to some extent in the sufferings of Christ. As Jesus told the disciples in Jn. 15:19, "If you belonged to the world it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." This provides an opportunity for the reality of the resurrection life to shine through us.

3. In v. 12 Paul concludes by conceding that death is at work in him and his companions, in the sense of "dying a thousand deaths." He adds, however, that life is at

work in the Corinthians, suggesting that part of their suffering is endured in their effort to spiritually bless the Corinthians.

4. In vv. 13-14 Paul speaks of the faith that drives him to preach in spite of the suffering he faces.

a. He *knows* that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise them "with Jesus." As Paul indicated in 1 Cor. 15:20-23, Jesus' resurrection is the first-fruits, a sign of the full harvest to follow. God, who gathered the first-fruits, will surely bring in the full harvest.

b. That resurrection is not only for apostles but for all, such as the Corinthians, who have put their faith in Christ. They, along with Paul and his companions, will be brought into the divine presence "on that day."

5. In v. 15 Paul says that all he does and all he endures is to bless people like the Corinthians and ultimately to bring glory to God as more and more people receive his grace and come to praise him as a result.

G. Boldness Reaffirmed and Further Supported (4:16 - 5:5)

1. In light of his interpretation of his hardships in 4:7-15, Paul restates (verbatim from 4:1) his boldness in preaching the gospel despite affliction (4:16a) and adds some further supporting comments (4:16b - 5:5).

2. In addition to the greatness of the ministry entrusted to them and the fact suffering provides a context for the presentation of the resurrection life, they do not lose heart in preaching because, though their body is being worn out by persecutions, their heart is being invigorated by the Spirit. As Bruce comments, his spiritual resilience resulted from the inner resources which supplied him with constant sustenance and refreshment.

3. In 4:17 Paul comments on the perspective which both results from and reinforces the spiritual strengthening of his inner man.

a. The eternal glory that awaits Paul and his companions, if they will remain faithful to their mission (which is producing the hardships), makes all such hardships fade in comparison (see, Rom. 8:18-27).

b. Their "light suffering" also "produces" the eternal glory in the sense of filling up what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions (see, Col. 1:24). The sufferings of Christ continue, in the sufferings of his people (Acts 9:4), during this overlap of ages until they reach their appointed limit (see, Rev. 6:9-11). Then Christ will return, consummating the "age to come."

4. 4:18 suggests that this faithfulness through afflictions occurs "as [they] focus not on the things that are seen but on the things that are not seen." In other words, their *modus operandi* is to keep the big picture before their eyes, to focus on the coming eternal reality rather than on the transient difficulty.

5. According to 5:1, this perspective aids faithfulness even in the face of death because they know that if their earthly, tent-like house (= body [4:10] = mortal flesh [4:11] = outward man [4:16]) is destroyed (i.e., they die), they have an eternal dwelling with God.

a. Following Furnish's view that "building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens" refers to the temple of the new eschatological Jerusalem, which in turn stands for the new age or consummated kingdom.

b. Many commentators take it to be a more specific reference to the resurrection body.

6. 5:2 says that, having this knowledge of our eternal destiny, we sigh or groan in desire and anticipation, longing in the face of the struggles of mortal existence to clothe ourselves over with our dwelling from heaven.

a. This verse begins literally: "And indeed in this we sigh/groan." Many take "in this" to mean "in this tent/body" rather than in this knowledge.

b. The "groaning" is not an expression of doubt or agony but an expression of hope and anticipation. It's the sighing of a pain charged with hope (see, Rom. 8:23-25). This is supported by the fact the verb "we groan" is qualified by the participial phrase "longing to clothe ourselves over with our dwelling from heaven." As Kruse comments:

What is being described is essentially a positive longing to put on a heavenly dwelling. While afflictions experienced by the apostle may have caused him to groan and sharpened his longing, this all resulted in a strong desire for what God had promised rather than with a preoccupation with the afflictions themselves -- something which would have been quite uncharacteristic of the apostle as we see him in his letters.

c. The verb "clothe ourselves over" means to put an item of clothing over what is already on, like an overcoat. It is used again in v. 4, but the verb in v. 3 is different (see below).

7. 5:3 is a parenthetical comment probably aimed at some in Corinth. Furnish translates it "presupposing, of course, that having once clothed ourselves we shall not be found naked."

a. Paul is saying that this hope to clothe themselves over with the heavenly dwelling presupposes that those having clothed themselves with Christ (in baptism - Gal. 3:27) will not be found naked by God at the judgment, meaning alienated from Christ. In other words, the heavenly hope assumes that the Christian will not have denied his baptism (which, interestingly, Paul believed was the consequence of accepting the false gospel of the Judaizers - see, Gal. 5:4 - "You who seek to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace").

b. Thus, the reference in v. 2 to "clothing ourselves over with our heavenly dwelling" is an extension of our having initially clothed ourselves with Christ. As Furnish says, "to 'clothe oneself' with Christ at baptism is to receive the Spirit as a *down payment* on the fullness of salvation (v.5; 1:22; cf. Rom. 8:23), and to long to 'clothe oneself over' with a heavenly dwelling is to long for the fulfillment of what has already been inaugurated."

8. 5:4 reiterates the point of v. 2. We sigh longingly in the midst of afflictions because we are resolved not to deny Christ, which afflictions tempt us to do, but to clothe ourselves over with the fullness of salvation. Our hearts are set on faithfulness and its eternal reward, so we particularly long for that reward when the hardships of this temporal reality inflict us.

9. 5:5 declares that God is the one who equipped us for life which shall engulf our mortality by giving us the Spirit as a down payment on that life. The aorist participles (equipped, gave) correspond to the aorist participle in v. 3 (having clothed ourselves) and point to a decisive moment in the past, no doubt the time of baptism.